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THE RECOVERY OF EUROPE

BY HILAIRE BELLOC

II

WHAT we have to prevent, if we are to save ourselves, is the reformation of that smouldering possibility, the Central European State. For if it once take form, no matter under what disguise, particularly if the disguise is unconscious, no matter under what name, whether it is called Republican or Imperial, co-equally federal, or rallied round one centre—the older Europe is insecure. The highly organised, highly differentiated nations of the west, particularly Great Britain and France and the new Italy, will stand separate before such a menace—and an organism of this kind, no matter how it might arise, would have the East in its power.

That we may understand the problem, let us try to put fairly to ourselves the attitude of those who but recently tried to bring such a State into being, under the direct hegemony of Prussia.

Men talk sometimes as though the ambitions of these men had been narrow, and purely mechanical; as though Prussia were an intriguer quite indifferent to the fate of every other German State (for she was the least German of all), and as though her dependents and allies were attached merely by force or fraud to that great mass which she led.

That is an imperfect view, and in particular cases it is a completely false view. The point of Prussia was that her discipline, crude though it was, and quite uncreative, could promise to most of the German nations organised under a Prussian Presidency prosperity and strength;

and that Prussia could offer as proof of such a claim the great victories of a generation ago. Such a German Confederation being established, it achieved a natural preponderance over the partly German imperial system of the south, Austria, and through this union threatened all the Slav world, and impressed or controlled in part the nearer East.

Now such a system, though Prussia was immensely valuable to it, was not necessarily, in theory at least, dependent upon the power or even the existence of Prussia.

The men who conceived a vast central European State, with an inevitable influence extending eastward, though Prussia was the backbone of their system, had a more general theory in mind. What they said to themselves (and still say to themselves) would remain true in their minds though the Prussian system should fail to rise from its ruins, and though the very region itself east of the Elbe should be blotted out.

What they said to themselves was something like this:

The accidents of history have made of all Central Europe east of the German peoples such a welter and puzzle of conflicting languages, religions, races and national traditions, that no permanent solution is possible save large impartial *Empires* ruling the distracted welter—and best of all one large empire, federal in nature, wherein the German, especially under a Prussian discipline, will naturally direct, but into which we must—rather against the grain—admit the Magyar. The Magyar is an obstacle because he is highly national, clearly defined, and jealous of his independence. The other much larger nation, still more

clearly defined, and still more attached to national freedom, is Poland. But Poland we dismembered in the moment of her weakness. The Magyars we failed to subdue; for we attempted it too late. We accept the Magyars, then, as a sort of junior partner with subject peoples of their own to coerce, and we solve the general problem by this idea of a Federal Empire which will control the centre of Europe. Such a unity is capable of vast economic expansion as well as of military power; for it can organise the parts of one great whole and throw its combined effect on section after section of industry in succession: it has a "mobile economic reserve" superior by far to that of any other European unit. Further it will control the East, for it holds the approaches to the East, and merges racially and culturally with the East through the Balkans. Side by side with this economic settlement goes the political settlement which alone makes it possible. This great central State in Europe is the natural and inevitable form which, under modern conditions, all that vast territory will take, whether it be called a Federation of Sovereigns, or of republics, or of both; an Empire with an elected or an hereditary head, or a mere group of States with not even a nominal chief or President, the *thing* will of necessity exist.

Such is the conception still firmly planted in every North German head. It has not suffered defeat. It is taken for granted, as we take the future of our colonial system for granted.

A Central European State will arise, they think, and be master.

Well, that is exactly what we have to prevent. What may prevent it we must next inquire.

What can prevent, and what alone can prevent the resurrection of this menace, is a combination of three things, lacking any one of which the fruits of the war are lost.

The first is the true and full restoration of the nationalities, wherein the test is Poland, and the test of that test is Danzig.

The second is a common control of the two gates which geographically close the Baltic and the Black Sea.

The third is the constitution of such a

common control by those western nations which bled, and almost died, in defence of Europe and the world against the barbaric conception of the Central State.

Each of these three is essential to the result. Be certain that if we fail in any one, the rest are lost.

If in the first of these there is weakness, treason, or ignorance, we certainly fail altogether. It is the keystone, all the more the keystone because it is new to the West.

If the second is compromised by quarrelling or misapprehension, the first is a bit of waste paper; for if you have not certain access to the Baltic and the Black Sea, if you leave these in particular hands, then the West gives up all voice in the East. Surely the war has taught us that!

GUARDIANS OF THE EAST

The third point is the most difficult to erect, and to maintain. It is as essential as the other two. Lacking it, we shall never achieve our end. It is the Western Powers which must, in the nature of things, be the warrantors for and the guardians of the newly freed nations of the East *and* of the international waterways to the Black Sea and the Baltic, because that against which they are ranged has exactly contrary interests. Those who desire to produce—no matter in what form—a great central State in Europe desire, by definition, the control of the Baltic and the Black Sea, and the weakening and division of the Eastern nationalities.

Let us take these three necessities of the situation and examine them more closely.

We must set up the new nationalities. A treaty of peace which did not impose this piece of justice upon the reluctant Germans and Magyars would be a direct negation of all we have said, and, speak-

ing for the general public at least, sincerely said during the war. But there will be more resistance, open and secret, to such a policy than most people are yet aware of.

You have these factors of resistance:

First, the inertia of Western opinion on the matter. It is indeed natural and explicable, but may none the less be fatal. Five years ago no one in the West, beyond a handful of experts, knew or cared about the national traditions of those subject to the Germans and Magyars. How many educated men of one's acquaintance could have drawn even approximately on the map the Western boundaries of a free Rumanian State? How many could define the belt of Serbian population north of the Danube? One has only to ask such a question about one's own ignorance to appreciate how little we knew. The war has largely changed this state of affairs, but it remains true that the problems involved are distant and unfamiliar. Though their solution is vital to us, we cannot easily think of them as immediate; and that is a very dangerous mood to be in. It is the common mood of a man who neglects the approach of a mortal disease because he has had no experience of it and sees no external sign of it near him.

Next, we have the rooted, secular conviction of every German and every Magyar that he is in some way the natural superior of the Slav and the Rumanian. That is a much more formidable obstacle than the policy of a Government. The persecution of the Poles by the Germans, that of the Serbians and of the Rumanians by the Magyars, was not a whim of autocracy: it was a profoundly national act with centuries of national feeling and action behind it. This war has confirmed the feeling very strongly. We must remember that point, for it is important.

Our enemies have been defeated in the West; but in the East and against the Eastern nationalities they were for three years victorious, and that space of time has had a great effect.

It is an illusion, of course. There is not apparent to the impartial foreigner any German superiority over his Eastern neighbours save that of a more industrialised civilisation. But those illusions are strong, and, when left unchecked, they mould history. The only way of reducing them in a man or a nation is the presentation of a contrary *fact* persistently maintained, and by its very existence contradicting and gradually dissolving the imaginary. The new nations extended to their widest limits, and fully supported by the Western Powers which have released them, will be a *fact* pressing upon the foolish pride of their former masters with the constant force of reality and ultimately humbling it. Nothing else will.

Next, we have the lack of obvious boundaries, the vagueness of definition, which characterises the limits of nationality in the East of Europe especially. It is purely a negative argument, and one which would never be used save by the enemies of local patriotism; but it has a powerful effect upon the Western mind when it is put forward. The Western nations are so long accustomed to highly defined and sharp boundaries that the conditions of the East of Europe in this respect puzzle them. As we shall see in a moment, the test case of all—that of the basin of the Vistula—is a very pronounced example of this difficulty.

Lastly, and far more effective as a force opposing us than any other of the factors mentioned, is the economic arrangement of what was so recently the German Empire, and is still in its economic arrangement a united body. This is the very core and centre of the resistance which we shall

meet, and it will appear in a number of changing forms difficult to seize, omnipresent and million-tongued.

THE FINANCIAL INTEREST

If, as the less reputable Press and the simpler of its readers assert, there were a country called "Germany," which actually had certain definite economic interests of its own, different from those of France and England, the matter would be a simple one. We should make this clearly defined economic entity supply reparation for the evil it has done in its military aspect. But, unfortunately, the modern world is not built upon those lines. The great capitalised interests, especially the largest of all, are not only interlocked, uniting Central and Western Europe in one group: that phase is already passing, and we were arriving before the war at a state of affairs in which the control of great staple interests was really international. It was pure accident that one man should be living in London, and perhaps sitting as a member of a British Government, while his brother or cousin should be living in Hamburg or Frankfort. They might both of them have been living in London or both of them been living in Germany, for it makes no difference to the arrangement of the financial interests which they controlled. The great mass of the people to whom reparation is due know nothing of these things.

Now, this international financial force, which is the greatest power of our time, is closely interlocked with the Prussian system and opposed to the resurrection of free nationalities in Eastern Europe. Of the various great States over which it has spread its power, and upon the politicians on which it relied for its positive influence, none was more necessary to international finance, none was more cordially related to it, or more intimately, than that

of what was but yesterday the German Empire. The great interests, textile, mining, shipping, the great energies of production and transport, which are the supply and basis of national financial interests, were organised upon a system which took for granted the German Empire and its dependents to be arranged as they have been arranged for a generation.

The economic expansion of this system, through tentacles which it has thrown out all over the world, was stamped upon the subject nationalities. When I visited Warsaw in 1912 the most striking thing I saw was the contrast between the old high, refined civilisation of the Poles and the sprawling Germanised industry imposed upon the town in quite recent years. The exploitation of the Balkans was about to begin when the war began and, beyond it, the exploitation of the nearer East had already begun. The control of the seaboard was and is necessary to this economic interest. That is why, when we come to the test point of Danzig, we shall find it acting with full vigour.

Now, as is nearly always the case when you have a difficult task to perform, the particular task of resurrecting a free nationality, especially in Eastern Europe, at once the duty and the prime interest of the Western allies—and in particular of England—is subject to a *test*. You may know whether you have or have not succeeded; you may know whether you are or are not deceiving yourself by taking some clearly defined point, one aspect of which would be the mark of your achievement: its contrary, the mark of your defeat or slackness. The test in this case is not only Poland, but the kind of approach to the sea which the new Poland would be granted. If we re-erect Poland as a great State, and give it access to the sea such as it possessed for centuries, and by which

alone it can live, we have done what is necessary to restore the equilibrium of Europe. But if we give it that kind of access to the sea which spares the enemy and which leaves the isolated group of Eastern Prussia in contact with the rest of the Germans, then what we have done will not last. The whole point of our effort is to make something permanent. All these vast evils which have fallen upon the world during the last four years have proceeded from the fact that the equilibrium of Europe was unstable. Power in the hands of Prussia was an unnatural thing, for Prussia was not fit to exercise power, but degraded, and making vile everything which its expansion affected.

THE PRUSSIAN "ISLAND"

It is an accident of political geography that the Polish race and all its historical traditions occupies a stretch of country reaching to the sea, indeed, but enclosing a little island of purely Prussian culture with its capital at Koenigsberg. This island of alien speech and tradition corresponds to rather more than half, the northern half, of the province of East Prussia. Koenigsberg is its capital. It is the seed plot of Prussia and her system. It was as a vassal of the Polish kingdom that the Prussian kingdom arose. Between this Eastern colony, as it were, and the mass of the German nations to the west lies a broad, unbroken belt of purely Polish land, and in between come the mouths of the Vistula and the great port of Danzig. Here is the test within the test. Here is the point upon which we can put our finger and say: If it suffers such and such a fate, we have won, If, from whatever cause, it suffers a contrary fate, we have lost. If Danzig remains under the rule of Prussia or within the Prussian orbit, you might as well not let Poland approach the sea at all. Danzig controls all the trade and half

the political influence of that district. There has been a heavy German colonisation of the town for generations past. Its speech is in the main German. Its capitalisation is German when it is not international. There will be strong arguments for its exception from the greater Poland which it is vital to us to erect. If those arguments prevail, that greater Poland will not survive. It is our enemy that will re-arise.

I have said that the second of the three things necessary to reap the fruits of the war is a common control of the two gates of entry to the Baltic and to the Black Sea. Before the war, the one was entirely in the hands of what was then the German Empire, the other in the hands of the Turkish Government, which was in the main under German control. It goes without saying that such a state of affairs has ceased with the victory of the Allies. We certainly shall not permit, in the paper of the treaty, at least, when it is signed, the continued control of either of these avenues in such hands. Indeed, the power which originally exercised that control has ceased to be. But the danger lies in leaving either of these entries politically and even nominally in particular hands. Take the case of the Kiel Canal. If the country upon either side of the Kiel Canal is politically controlled for civil purposes by a German State, we have no guarantee of the permanent international use thereof. In other words, there must not only be international committees to act as the executive of the common control of these waterways: there must also be garrisons, and the civil government of the land about them must also be in the hands of an international executive. Vast as are the economic interests concerned here, the political interests are greater still, If Western Europe has not full, free, and continued use of the Kiel Canal the Baltic will necessarily remain in the control of

the German States to the south of it, and two of the Scandinavian countries, at least, will fall back into their old orbit. The position of the canal involves, through rapidity of transit, control over the natural waterways to the north. It cuts off Poland in any moment of crisis. It cuts off whatever may arise as a State in Northern and Central Russia.

The case of the Bosphorus is too well known to need analysis. Economically, it is of greater importance than the gate of the Baltic. It is the door to one of our granaries and to one of our oil supplies. But there is a political side to it which is a new side: the gates of the Black Sea will be the connection by which the Western Powers can reach the southern group of the new nationalities, particularly Rumania. Of the two avenues, it is the Bosphorus which will most certainly have to be internationalised. The struggle will take place over the Kiel Canal, and there, as in the case of Danzig, we shall have all the arguments of nationalism turned against us. It will be said with justice that the country through which the canal passes is German in culture and tradition: that the work done was a German work. Indeed, if it were possible to apportion the new world exactly by racial boundaries, with no exception and with no concern for any other principle, it would be impossible to establish European control over this waterway. But the exception must be made, as must sundry others. Notably that of Danzig, which we have just considered. Because if we do not make it, we are putting power necessary to our lives into the hands of what we have discovered to be the most dangerous of enemies.

THE FUTURE AT STAKE

The third point is, I think, the most difficult; although in earlier and better

times it would have been the most obvious. The common controls which we are about to establish, the general policy which we are about to develop, must be established and must be principally controlled by the Western Powers who have been the protagonists in the great struggle. The British, the French, and, in their own sphere, the Italian peoples, are those who must be the guardians. It is their resistance to the Prussian scheme; it is their tenacity and their sacrifice who have saved the world; and it is they which by tradition represent those things to preserve which the war was fought. It will neither be just nor politic, and, what is worse, not statesmanship, it will not correspond to external reality, to treat the parties to the peace as a sort of mathematical symbols, units, equivalents. They are not. They are living nations with vital interests to preserve, with terrible dangers menacing them if they fail, with their whole future at stake.

Nothing permanent will be done if the general direction of affairs slips from their hands or is compromised by them.

There is here a quarrel between two principles: one false and the other true. The false one appealing to superficial minds, and even seeming obvious to them, the true one more difficult to appreciate.

By the first principle, that nation is regarded at the end of the war as the strongest and the most able to dictate its terms which is the least exhausted. Thus, to take an extreme case, the neutral who has not fought at all will reap the harvest of any great struggle, and that belligerent among the victors who has sacrificed most will obtain the least reward. That the theory is false—its opposite is true. It is those who sacrifice most, who strain themselves to the utmost, and who are, therefore, the most exhausted at the close of

the campaign, who reap its results in the long run.

Why this is so it will be difficult to discover, though one may suggest that the moral effect of victory gained at a great price has something to do with it. But, at any rate, all history is there to prove the truth of the least obvious of these two contrasted theories. For one thing, exhaustion is not a permanent phase on the victorious side, whatever it may be upon the side of the vanquished. For another, the sense of justice, the sense of what is due to effort and to sacrifice and an intense emotion will profoundly affect the near future.

The task of resettling Europe is much more difficult than the facile programmes issued during the war would lead men to think. It is terribly complex, filled with the most difficult problems, and demanding wisdom and forbearance between highly educated peoples, all of whom contribute to the common victory.

Worst of all, both in peril and in complexity, there is the problem of disarmament; at the very moment when men speak of disarmament you have the air full of programmes for increased power. The machinery of international agreement which all desire to set up has not been so much as sketched out. No one as yet can give even the most elementary idea of what an international court is, or what its constituents, its powers, or its procedure may be. There are whole series of such grave questions still left unanswered.

None the less, in the case of this great evil, as in the case of minor difficulties to be dealt with in life, it is everything to have the main lines of the affair clearly before us, before one approaches solving of the riddle; and those main lines I take

to be in their largest aspect the three dealt with here: the confirmation of national life, the secure and free entry of the inland seas, and, the most important of all, the control of our decisions, not by some mechanical system of voting, but by the frank confession that the Western Powers, having won the war, shall dictate its conclusion.

There is, of course, a further matter, which I have not touched on because it is, I think, obvious to all and universally admitted. It is the question of reparation. On this there is very little to be said because no issue exists and the problem is of the simplest kind. The maximum effort which can be obtained from those who have ruined so much—that is, upon the people formerly composing the German Empire—must, of course, be obtained, and will be obtained. When it has been obtained—to whatever limit we may strain that effort, for whatever length of time we may compel them to the work, and whatever just confiscation of material may also be necessary—the resultant will fall far below the mere material injury which they have done. The mere wealth which they have destroyed by their singular interpretation of military honour could not be met even by the largest possible advantage of energy spread over the longest practicable period of time. We must be quite clear on that. There can be no discussion save the discussion of what is possible. In the matter of principle, in the matter of justice, the conclusion is one with which the whole world agrees. Indeed, if reparation were not made to the utmost, civilisation could not endure. The example of such crimes escaping their consequences would be too much for the survival of Europe.

—*Land and Water.*